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ANIMAL RIGHTS ACTIVISTS SOMEHOW HAVE MIXED FEELINGS WHEN IT COMES TO ABORTION

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Recently, from controlling wildlife populations, to hunting for sport, to eating meat, the issues of animal welfare and human responsibility have received increasingly prominent news coverage. I've found myself reflecting on my own philosophical journey to a position that places priority on human life along with grave responsibility for the preservation and treatment of all living creatures.

Although I may disagree with some of its underlying principles, there is much for me, an anti-abortion activist, to respect in the animal rights movement.

Animal rights activists, like me, have risked personal safety and reputation for the sake of other living beings.

Animal rights activists, like me, are viewed by many in the mainstream as fanatical wackos, ironically exhorted by irritated passersby to "Get a life!"

Animal rights activists, like me, place a higher value on life than on personal comfort or convenience and, in balancing the sometimes competing interests of rights and responsibilities, choose to err on the side of compassion and non-violence.

This is why I am perplexed, not by the notable exceptions such as environmentalist Jeremy Rifkin who is pro-human life, too, but by the majority within the animal rights movement who support the "right" to do to a human fetus what would never be countenanced for an animal.

I grew up in a home where many of the animals I considered family pets ended up on the dinner table. I learned by experience that the most distasteful part of getting a chicken from the roost to the pot isn't the actual slaughter, but the sweaty, smelly and tedious task of removing the feathers afterward.

Though raising, hunting, preparing and eating meat was an unquestioned part of my life, I nevertheless cultivated a lifelong knowledge and love of animals that continues to be a chief source of joy today.

So it didn't take a gruesomely eye-opening description (such as that given in a recent Buffalo News column) of how Bessie becomes a burger to curb forever my appetite for meat. All it took was one word, used by a Hindu acquaintance during a lunchtime (vegetarian, of course) conversation. When he referred to meat as "flesh," that so very . . . human . . . word made an indelible impression on my view of that particular food source. My ingestion of meat has been on a steady decline every since.

I just as immediately recognized my hypocrisy in turning in denial from the stomach-churning scene, since I am quick to criticize those who react similarly to abortion. I guiltily turned the station back and forced myself to undergo a jolting dose of reality until the fortuitous ringing of the phone 15 minutes later.

I can't help but wonder what might happen if the animal rights activists and the human life activists spent some honest, respectful time with each other. I've had a few opportunities to initiate such dialogue.

Awhile back, I had a hallway discussion about my opposition to abortion with a couple of marveling graduate students. One of them was an animal rights advocate who was also very pro-choice. The response of the other student to a description of the violence of the most common abortion procedure -- "Well, what if we could make abortion painless for the fetus by putting it to sleep first . . . like an

animal?" -- evoked horrified stares from both me and the animal rights advocate.

Once, upon noticing the logo of a radical animal rights group affixed to her stationery, I asked a friend of mine, a fairly prominent abortion rights activist, if she would tolerate having done to a rabbit what abortion does to a human fetus. She never responded.

Another time, I asked a vegetarian-for-moral-reasons colleague if he'd consider giving his beloved purebred dog an abortion if she were to have an unwanted pregnancy (something not uncommon among purebred dog owners). He glared at me, terror-stricken. "I never thought about that," he said. "I love my dog! I couldn't imagine it!"

Is it just me, or is something amiss here?

The higher value I place on human life is consistent with my belief that human beings are made in the image of God and animals are not.

Animal rights advocates who believe that humans and animals are equal (or at least close) and who also support abortion are, at the very least, inconsistent in failing to protect the most vulnerable members of the human species.

That's what I don't understand.

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